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CERTAIN WEST-INDIAN SUPERSTITIONS PERTAINING TO CELTS

BY

THEODOOR DE BOOY

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CERTAIN WEST-INDIAN SUPERSTITIONS PERTAINING TO CELTS.

BY THEODOOR DE BOOY.

The writer of the following paper was enabled during a period of five years — in which he had frequent occasion to visit the West Indian Islands, and more particularly the Bahamas, Jamaica, Cuba, and Hayti — to collect a certain number of superstitions and beliefs about celts. From the nature of the writer's work — i.e., the collecting for the Heye Museum of New York City of archæological specimens of the pre-Columbian tribes that inhabited these regions — it can readily be understood what great facilities he had to acquire data on these various beliefs, especially as the present-day population set great store on celts in their possession, and, in consequence of their superstitions regarding them, attach a far greater monetary value to specimens of this class than they do to such other aboriginal artifacts as they may happen to possess. The result is that the inquiring archæologist is told of the particular reason why the owner of the celt values his property so highly; and while this frequently means that the price asked for a specimen is totally out of reason, and that therefore a purchase cannot be considered, the inquiry proves to be of interest to students of the folk-lore of these regions.

Let it first be stated that the usual name in the West Indies for the petaloid celt is "thunderbolt," "thunderball," or "thunderstone," on the British Islands; "piedra del rayo" ("lightningstone"), on those islands where Spanish is spoken; and "pierre tonnerre" ("thunderstone"), in the Republic of Hayti. These names in themselves point to a belief in a celestial origin of the celt; and so firmly fixed is this class of name in the mind of the present-day inhabitant of the Antilles, that he fails to recognize a celt by any other name. The writer was once told by a gentleman who desired to make a collection of celts, that he visited Nassau in the Bahamas for two winter seasons, and made diligent inquiries for specimens, giving elaborate technical descriptions of celts to the negroes he interrogated, but to no avail. Finally a white resident told him to inquire for "thunderbolts," and within a short time he succeeded in obtaining several good specimens.

The idea, then, that these stones drop from the skies during a thunderstorm is so firmly fixed in the mind of the Antilleans, that no amount of reasoning will convince them to the contrary. At first,

when the writer came across ideas of this kind, he attempted to persuade the negroes that celts could not possibly have been formed in this manner, but it did not take him long to find out that this was energy wasted. One particular instance deserves recording, as illustrating that there are certain limits above which the African mind cannot rise. A Haytien physician who had studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and who undoubtedly was a clever surgeon, also was imbibed with the idea that celts were "thunderstones;" and despite the fact that the writer argued with him and talked to him for a considerable length of time on the principles of physics, chemistry, and meteoric phenomena, the physician in the end was still unconvinced. Finally, on being shown a ceremonial celt (i.e., a celt upon one side of which was carved in low relief the squatting figure of an aboriginal deity), and asked how a thunderstorm could have produced this upon the surface of the stone, the physician said this might have been carved upon it by an Indian *after* it had fallen from the skies.

The superstitions about celts do not differ materially throughout the West Indies, but it was in the Bahamas and in Jamaica that the writer collected the greatest number of these. This, however, may be due to an insufficient knowledge of Spanish and the French "patois" spoken in Hayti. The negroes of Jamaica, the Bahamas, Cuba, Hayti, and Santo Domingo, all agree that celts are produced by thunderstorms, that they drop from the skies, and penetrate the earth to a depth of seven feet. This depth never varies in their recitals, no matter on what island the story is told, which is somewhat remarkable; and the thunderstorm idea is so firmly fixed, that the writer has frequently been pointed out houses and cocoanut-trees struck by lightning, with the assertion that, if he dug down seven feet, he would undoubtedly come across one of the stones he was so anxiously inquiring after. Then, again, the "thunderbolts" re-appear on the surface of the earth after seven years, a period of time which also never varies; and on several occasions the writer asked his informant if the stone worked itself towards the surface at the rate of a foot a year. This proved too deep a problem to the native mathematicians.

What undoubtedly corresponds to the northern idea that "lightning never strikes twice in the same place" is the Antillean superstition that if one keeps a "thunderbolt" in the house, this is an effective guard against the building being struck by lightning. This is one of the reasons why it is occasionally hard to make an owner part with his stone, for, so he argues, what would in the future protect him against being struck by lightning if he sold it? On many of the small sailing-vessels that gain a precarious living collecting sponges on the Bahama banks, a celt is kept on board for the same purpose. On one or two occasions the writer even came across negro families, which,

for better protection and to guard from loss, had carefully buried a "thunderbolt" under the doorstep of their abode.

The West Indians have a very simple way to determine whether or not a stone is a "proper thunderbolt," to use a Jamaica negro expression. This is to tie a thread firmly around the middle of the celt, and then to suspend it over a lighted candle or the fire. If the thread does not burn or break, the "thunderbolt" is genuine. Strange to say, this test is universally acknowledged to be infallible throughout the northwestern part of the West Indies; and the writer has collected many celts which still show the stone somewhat blackened by the soot of the candle, and a clean line where the thread had been. Needless to say, any smooth stone will allow this test, owing to the physical law that a smooth surface allows the thread to lie closely against the stone with no air intervening, in consequence of which combustion of the thread cannot take place for some time; in fact, not until the stone itself is hot enough to burn the thread. Many and bitter were the disappointments of the negroes when they offered the writer ordinary smooth pebbles for sale, vowing that they were "proper thunderbolts" because the thread did not burn.

"Thunderbolts" also are endowed with wonderful medicinal properties, if one can believe the West Indians. In case of stomachic pains, generally due to too much indulgence in salt fish after a long period of semi-starvation, there is nothing so good as to lay a celt upon the seat of trouble. If at the same time a little water is drunk in which a celt has been steeped, the trouble is almost sure to disappear. Strange to say, a celt is also supposed to be an excellent means of keeping water cool, and for this purpose is often kept in the earthenware water-jar found in so many negro cabins. It is a wonder, therefore, that stomach troubles occur at all, as the water in which the celt is steeped is drunk constantly, and should therefore act as a preventive against this affliction. This, however, is a problem which the writer will not attempt to solve. The fact remains that he has often surreptitiously fished around in the water-jars of such cabins as he happened to visit, in order to try and find celts, frequently with the most surprising success.

It would also appear that celts are held in esteem by the "obiah-men" of Jamaica and the "voodoo-priests" of Hayti, although the writer was never able to discover to what particular purpose these stones served the native witch-doctors. Any inquiry on this subject was immediately met with the most stubborn silence and a pretence of stupidity, which could not be penetrated. During a stay in one of the smaller towns in Jamaica, the writer heard of the arrest of a man suspected of the practice of obiah, for which there is a very heavy penalty in this colony. Being anxious to discover what the prisoner

had in his possession in the way of native poisons, love-philters, etc., the police-sergeant was interviewed, and the writer was willingly shown the obiah-man's outfit. This consisted mostly of a few small bottles filled with insects, powdered earth, etc., a few colored rags, a small coffin fashioned out of wood, and a perfect specimen of a petaloid celt. The sergeant could not — or would not, which is more likely — tell what purpose the "thunderbolt" served in the outfit of the witch-doctor, but was willing enough to donate it to the writer. Most likely the stone was used as in the Bahamas and elsewhere, to "cure" the sick. In Hayti, also, the "voodoo-priests" attach great value to these stones; but, as it is not safe to make too many inquiries in this country regarding the practices of the native medicine-men, it is probable that this mystery cannot be cleared up.

Perhaps the most curious of all beliefs was told the writer by one of his boatmen in the Bahamas. This sailor at one time had served as a coal-passer on a small steamer, and in consequence regarded himself as a quite efficient engineer. On one occasion, when the subject "thunderbolt" was under discussion, he told the writer that these stones contained so much "electric" that if they were pulverized, they would furnish enough power to run the largest engines. This, however, must not be taken as a typical superstition, but rather as a proof to what heights the imagination of a negro mind can ascend.

It is likely that there are still other superstitions about celts, although the writer knows of no others from the West Indies. A few authors — notably Dr. J. W. Fewkes in his "Aborigines of Porto Rico," and Frederick A. Ober in "The Storied West Indies," "In the Wake of Columbus," and a few other works — have briefly noted the fact that celts were named "piedra del rayo" and "thunderbolts." It must also be added here, that, besides a superstitious value, the native West Indian also attaches a monetary value to stones of this class. It is not unusual to find that some of the finest specimens bear marks of having recently been broken. Whenever an archæologist remains in one place for any length of time, and the negroes hear that he is steadily purchasing celts, they begin to think that the stones must contain something that makes them valuable to the white man. In order to find out what this may be, they smash up a celt or two to investigate whether or not the stone contains gold or some other precious metal, — an investigation which, needless to say, results only in disappointment. But the breaking-up of one or two stones does not convince; and the writer well remembers where he had been in one spot for over two weeks, and after a while every single celt brought in for sale bore evidence of this mutilation. It was then patiently explained to the negroes that broken "thunderbolts" were *not* purchased; and, as by this time they had no entire ones left, the would-be vendors betook themselves to their homes, "sadder and wiser men."

In conclusion, one more illustration of the value which the negro sometimes thinks his celts have. The writer and a Mr. C. V. Spicer, who was assisting in some archæological work in the Bahamas, were once lying anchored off a small settlement called Snug Corner, on Acklin Island, on a small sloop belonging to the Heye Museum, which was used for the Bahama work. The weather was quite squally, with a considerable amount of rain, and it was decided to retire early. Just before going to bed, a hail was heard; and within a few minutes a small, open sail-boat came alongside, with a crew of three men. The writer was then told that this boat had been all day long coming from the south point of Acklin, some twenty miles away; and it was evident that the trip had been wet and disagreeable, judging from the appearance of the three men. On inquiring what the men wanted, the writer was informed that they had three "thunderbolts" for sale, which, on examination, proved to be of the usual type, with a value of twenty-five cents apiece. In view of the fact that the three men had had an unpleasant time (the writer not knowing then that the trip had been made for his special benefit, but thinking that the three men were on their way to a more northerly settlement), they were offered thirty-six cents apiece for the stones. This offer was quickly declined; and never did the writer see a quicker change from the usual negro grin to the most utter African despondency. Mr. Spicer by this time was beginning to feel sorry for the men, and ordered them some supper, they having eaten nothing all day long during their "beat" against the wind from the south point of Acklin Island to Snug Corner; and it was only after the small boat had again departed into the night that the mystery was solved. During their supper the men told the crew of the Heye Museum sloop that they had come up especially from South Point to sell the celts to the writer, that they had been informed that the writer had paid fifty dollars apiece for "thunderbolts" at Fortune Island (a neighboring island), and that they expected to return to their village with at least a hundred and fifty dollars. This had excited their cupidity to such an extent that they had undertaken the long trip to windward on a stormy day, having probably kept themselves warm and comforted by thoughts of soon having this money to spend; and the writer's offer of thirty-six cents apiece for the stones was therefore all the more disheartening.

An occurrence of this kind was unusual, however, although it happened often that the possessor of a celt began by asking a pound sterling (about $4.80) for his property. This amount he steadily diminished, and in the end was glad enough to obtain from twenty-five to fifty cents for a stone which had cost him nothing in the beginning, save the trouble of stooping over and picking it up.

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New York City.

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